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FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [EU](#) [GM](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: GERMAN FM CALLS FOR POLITICAL REFORM IN TUNISIA;  
HIS MEETING WITH BEN ALI CANCELED -- FOR HEALTH REASONS?

REF: TUNIS 2480

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REAONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C/NF) SUMMARY. GERMANFOREIGN MINISTER STEINMEIER'S NOVEMBER 16 VISIT TO TUNISIA MADE INTERNATIONAL HEADLINES FOR THE STONG MESSAGE HE CARRIED -- BALANCING PRAISE FOR TNISIA'S PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IIGHTS WITH A CALL FOR GREATER POLITICAL REFORM. STEINMEIER'S MEETING WITH BEN ALI WAS CANCELED; THE TUNISIAN RUMOR MILL IS RIFE WITH EXPLANATIONS RELATED EITHER TO BEN ALIS HEALTH OR HIS IRE OVER THE GERMAN FMS OUTSPOKENNESS ON THE SENSITIVE ISSUE OF POLITICAL REFORM. END SUMMARY

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PRAISE FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS  
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12. (C) IN ADVANCE OF GERMANY'S ASSUMPTION OF THE EU PRESIDENCY IN JANUARY, GERMAN FOREIGN MINISTER STEINMEIER VISITED TUNISIA NOVEMBER 16 AS PART OF A FIVE-COUNTRY, FIVE-DAY TOUR TO NORTH AFRICA. ACCORDING TO GERMAN EMBASSY CONTACTS AND MEDIA REPORTING, IN STEINMEIER'S MEETING AND WORKING DINNER WITH FOREIGN MINISTER ABDALLAH, THE GERMAN FM PAID TRIBUTE TO GERMANY'S CLOSE AND LONG-RUNNING PARTNERSHIP WITH TUNISIA. HE ALSO PRAISED TUNISIA'S "GREAT PROGRESS" IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS, A POINT TO WHICH ABDALLAH RESPONDED BY NOTING WITH PRIDE THAT 85 PERCENT OF ALL TUNISIANS BELONG TO THE MIDDLE CLASS. IN STEINMEIERS MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, THE INTERLOCUTORS EXPLORED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLOSER COOPERATION IN RESEARCH AND EDUCATION, INCLUDING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL. STEINMEIER ALSO MET WITH PRIME MINISTER GHANNOUCHI AND CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES SPEAKER M'BAZAA.

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NEED FOR POLITICAL REFORM  
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13. (C) BOTH IN HIS PRIVATE MEETINGS WITH GOT OFFICIALS AND PUBLICLY, IN AN AUDIENCE WITH GERMAN AND TUNISIAN ACADEMICS, FLANKED BY THE TUNISIAN MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, STEINMEIER BALANCED HIS PRAISE FOR TUNISIA WITH STRONGLY WORDED CALLS FOR FURTHER PROGRESS IN THE AREA OF POLITICAL REFORM. AFP QUOTED THE GERMAN MINISTER AS SAYING: "FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE, WE WISH THAT WE SAW MORE MOVEMENT IN THE AREA OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION. IN ANY CASE, WE WILL SUPPORT YOU ON THIS PATH, FROM EUROPE AND BILATERALLY FROM GERMANY." A GERMAN EMBASSY OFFICIAL TOLD POLOFF THAT STEINMEIER WENT EVEN FURTHER IN HIS INTERACTIONS WITH GHANNOUCHI AND ABDALLAH. IN ADDITION TO CALLING FOR GREATER POLITICAL OPENNESS, STEINMEIER EXPRESSLY PROTESTED THE GOTS

BLOCQ OF THE PLANNED SEPTEMBER 8-9 EURO-MED CONFERENCE ON EMPLOYMENT ISSUES, WHICH WAS TO BE HELD UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE FRIEDRICH EBERT FOUNDATION, AMONG OTHER ORGANIZERS (REFTEL). GERMAN EMBASSY COUNTERPARTS TOLD POL/ECONCOUNS WITH SOME DISSATISFACTION THAT GOT COUNTERPARTS HAD NOT OFFERED AN EXPLANATION FOR THE CANCELLATION OF THE CONFERENCE.

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BEN ALI MEETING CANCELED -- FOR HEALTH REASONS?  
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14. (C/NF) THE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY IN TUNIS IS ABUZZ OVER THE CANCELLATION OF STEINMEIER'S PLANNED MEETING WITH PRESIDENT BEN ALI. GERMAN POLCOUNS TOLD POL/ECONDEPUTY THAT THE GOT CANCELED THE PLANNED NOVEMBER 17 MEETING ON THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 15TH AND THAT THE REASON GIVEN WAS THE PRESIDENTS "ILLNESS." HE NOTED THAT THEY HAD HEARD FROM "OTHER SOURCES" THAT BEN ALI WAS "VERY ILL" AND "UNABLE TO MOVE," AS A RESULT OF HIS LONG-RUNNING BATTLES WITH ARTHRITIS AND/OR PROSTATE CANCER. SEPARATELY, ANOTHER GERMAN EMBOFF TOLD POL/ECONCOUNS THAT THE BEN ALI HAD TO HAVE NON-EMERGENCY SURGERY PERFORMED ON HIS LEG. YET ANOTHER GERMAN EMBOFF TOLD CONSULAR CHIEF A DIFFERENT VERSION -- THAT BEN ALI HAD INDEED REQUIRED SURGERY, THAT IT WAS SERIOUS, AND THAT THE GERMANS SUSPECTED HE HAD TRAVELED ABROAD FOR IT. INDEED, THE GERMAN POLCOUNS DID NOTE THAT THE GERMAN DELEGATION HAD LOOKED FOR -- BUT HAD NOT SEEN -- THE PRESIDENT'S PRIVATE PLANE AT THE AIRPORT.

15. (C) MEANWHILE, THE ONLINE OPPOSITION WEBSITE TUNISNEWS IS CARRYING A PIECE BY AL-MAWQIF EDITOR RACHID KHACHANA SPECULATING THAT BEN ALI CANCELED HIS MEETING WITH STEINMEIER OUT OF ANGER OVER THE LATTER'S CALLS FOR POLITICAL REFORMS IN TUNISIA. THE SAME ONLINE ARTICLE POSITS THAT A PRESS CONFERENCE THAT WAS TO BE HELD AT THE TUNIS-CARTHAGE AIRPORT

JUST PRIOR TO STEINMEIER'S DEPARTURE WAS CALLED OFF FOR THE SAME REASON. THE TUNISIAN ARABIC-LANGUAGE DAILY AS-SABAH AND ITS FRENCH-LANGUAGE SISTER PAPER LE TEMPS CITED GERMAN EMBASSY SOURCES IN EXPLAINING THAT THE PRESS CONFERENCE HAD BEEN CANCELED DUE TO THE GERMAN FM'S "BUSY SCHEDULE." IN FACT, ACCORDING TO THE GERMAN POLCOUNS, THERE NEVER WAS A PLANNED PRESS CONFERENCE; A COUPLE OF TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS SHOWED UP AT THE VIP LOUNGE PRIOR TO STEINMEIER'S DEPARTURE, BUT THEY WERE SHOOED AWAY BY TUNISIAN MFA PROTOCOL OFFICIALS.

STEINMEIER DID MAKE A BRIEF STATEMENT TO THE GERMAN PRESS WHO WERE TRAVELING WITH HIM, HOWEVER.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C/NF) STEINMEIER'S CALL FOR POLITICAL REFORM IN TUNISIA IS THE STRONGEST LANGUAGE WE HAVE HEARD FROM THE GERMANS IN RECENT MEMORY AND THUS MAY REPRESENT AN OPENING FOR CLOSER COOPERATION IN PROMOTING THE REFORM AGENDA IN TUNISIA. AT THE RISK OF DOWNPLAYING THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S STRONG -- AND WELCOME -- MESSAGE ON THE NEED FOR GREATER OPENNESS IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE, ANOTHER INTERESTING ANGLE TO THE STEINMEIER VISIT IS THE INTRIGUE OVER THE CANCELLATION OF HIS MEETING WITH BEN ALI. IT IS NOT A STRETCH TO IMAGINE THAT BEN ALI'S HEALTH ISSUES LEFT HIM INDISPOSED, ALTHOUGH WHEN CHARGE SAW HIM AT AN OFFICIAL EVENT ON NOVEMBER 7, THERE WERE NO VISIBLE SIGNS OF ANY ILLNESS. THAT SAID, BEN ALI WATCHERS HAVE NOTED THAT SINCE NOVEMBER 14, THE ONLY PICTURES OF BEN ALI IN THE LOCAL PRESS HAVE BEEN STOCK PHOTOS. (WE HAVE SEEN THE FIRST LADY IN PERSON, THOUGH, AS SHE ENGAGED IN A MUCH-PUBLICIZED SHOPPING SPREE NOVEMBER 19 AT THE ANNUAL DIPLOMATIC WIVES' CHARITY BAZAAR.) SINCE BEN ALI HAS REPORTEDLY TRAVELED BEFORE TO GERMANY FOR MEDICAL REASONS, WE CONSIDER THE GERMAN EMBASSY TO BE A BETTER SOURCE THAN MOST, DESPITE THE LACK OF A UNIFIED LINE AMONG DIFFERENT GERMAN EMBOFFS.

GODEC